



**Connecticut General Assembly
Committee on Education
March 7, 2011**

Testimony on Raised Bill 6502: "An Act Concerning the Open Choice Program"

Representative Fleischmann, Senator Stillman, and members of the Committee,

My name is Jessica Leake, and I am the Outreach Coordinator for the Sheff Movement coalition, a regional network of parents, educators, and supporters of quality integrated education in the Hartford region. We support the goals of the Sheff v. O'Neill case, including the continued expansion of magnet schools and the Open Choice program, but we are not directly connected to the case, and we do not speak for the plaintiffs.

We are here today to testify in support of Raised Bill 6502, "An Act Concerning the Open Choice Program." The Open Choice program is a crucial element in the state's efforts to provide racially and economically integrated educational choices to Hartford students. Because of the extremely low reimbursement rates to participating suburban towns, this program has lagged far behind the very successful magnet school programs, and has not lived up to its potential. By increasing the reimbursement rates for towns that participate more fully in the program, we can quickly add new seats without building more schools, and we can do it in an extremely cost effective way. I will briefly address our comments to the specific sections of the bill:

Section 1 of Raised Bill 6502 creates a new "Crandall School program" to encourage new integrated school programs, either in Hartford or the surrounding suburbs. We think that this program has promise – especially as a way of coordinating investments in early childhood education, pre-k, and kindergarten options with the state's integration mandate. If this is done with careful planning, we can expand early childhood programs in a way that dramatically increases city-suburban school integration and gives young students a pathway to entering the Open Choice program at an early age. Our one concern about the Crandall School program is that it be carefully implemented so as not to draw students away from our excellent regional magnet schools run by CREC and the Hartford Public Schools – and we appreciate that the bill recognizes this concern in subsection 1(c).

Section 2 of the Bill would move us toward a coordinated regional transportation system for our choice education programs – something that has long been needed and which we hope will help to reduce vehicle miles traveled, reduce commuting times for students attending

magnet schools and Open Choice, and lead to a more efficient and cost-effective regional system.

Section 3 of the Bill is the heart of this legislation, and is essential to expanding the Open Choice program to meet the Sheff goals. Subsection 3(g)(2) would begin to fairly compensate suburban towns that receive additional children in the Open Choice program, increasing per pupil compensation to \$6000 per child for districts that have at least 3% of their enrollment in the Open Choice program. We understand that this is less than the average per pupil cost of educating a child in a suburban district, but we believe that it is sufficient to cover the marginal cost of adding an additional 3-4% of enrollment in these districts, and that it will create incentives to districts with available classroom space to participate. This dollar amount has been carefully reviewed by the Department of Education, and we think that it will work. But it is crucial that the legislature not reduce this per pupil figure any lower than it has already been reduced.

We also support the efforts of the Department to ensure that suburban districts have necessary professional development and other programs in place to successfully receive students from Hartford and to ensure a positive and fully engaged school experience for Open Choice students (including after school and extra curricular activities), so that Open Choice graduation rates remain high.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon. We look forward to working with the Committee to advance the goals of quality integrated education.

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students, and to serve more of them.

Increasing the payment to receiving towns would allow the towns to better serve the